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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CHENGDU 000238

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/CM, DRL, G

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/24/2033

TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON SOCI CH

SUBJECT: NORTHWEST YUNNAN'S DIQING PREFECTURE: SNAPSHOT OF A QUIETER TIBETAN BORDERLAND

REF: A. CHENGDU 197

1B. CHENGDU 77

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Northwest Yunnan's Tibetan Diqing Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) has been the calmest of all the ethnic Tibetan areas in China during 2008, likely due to a large presence of Han and other minorities (Tibetans only make up about a third of the population), the influence of its ethnic Tibetan party secretary, and a possibly less aggressive approach to patriotic education. During a recent visit by ConGenOff to Diqing, the local founder of an NGO to promote Tibetan culture vented his frustration about what he referred to as the "rapid pace of assimilation." Significant investments in road improvement, new construction, large-scale tree planting, and grasslands rehabilitation programs were evident throughout the Prefecture. Security appeared to be relatively light, but public notices suggested Diqing is trying to address problems related to corruption, counterfeiting (currency and tobacco), and drugs.
End Summary.

Scenery Draws Tourists to Shangri-la

¶2. (U) Diqing lies at the junction of Yunnan Province with the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Sichuan Province's Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The Diqing Prefecture capital of Zhongdian is located in Shangri-la County to the south of Deqin County. Diqing is a designated "Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture" largely for historical reasons. Its population of 366,000 people is 85 percent minority but only one-third ethnic Tibetan.

The next largest among the 26 officially designated minority groups in Diqing are the Lisu, Naxi, Bai and Yi. Deqin, the seat of Deqin County, lies in a long, narrow valley and attracts tourists who come to see the nearby mountains, especially the famed Snow Mountain. Many tourist hotels lie near a viewpoint, about 10 km outside of Deqin, where Snow Mountain can be seen on clear days. Photos of the area are available online at URL tinyurl.com/deqinzhongdianphotos.

Visit to the Tundrup Ling Monastery

¶3. (C) During a visit to Diqing in August, ConGenOff stopped at the Tundrup Ling Monastery about two hours south of Deqin city on the six hour bus trip north from Zhongdian. The leader of one group of Han Chinese in the middle of a guided tour that ConGenOff joined said to a monk, "there have been things in our

lives that have been very difficult for us, and particularly for me. I would like to talk with some monks about them." The monk leading the tour stopped and found two senior monks to talk with the visitors. (Comment: This is one of numerous examples ConGenOff has seen of the strong attraction Tibetan Buddhism appears to have for Han Chinese Buddhists). Repairs were underway in several parts of the monastery and there appeared to be few monks present.

¶4. (SBU) Diqing TAP, and particularly Deqin County, is one of the poorest areas of Yunnan. Shanghai Municipality, in a paring of a wealthy province/municipality with a poor county, contributed 113 million RMB (USD 14 million) to 190 poverty alleviation projects in Diqing during 2004 - 2007 and plans to contribute an additional 27 million RMB during 2008. Numerous road upgrades and construction projects are bringing both tourists and migrant workers to Deqin. Deqin city itself is in the midst of a building boom with many buildings in town marked with the character demolish (chai). New government and party offices are being built just south of Deqin.

¶5. (U) In Deqin city, ConGenOff met a migrant worker from Lijiang, ten hours by bus to the south, who was part of a group of workers carrying seedlings up into the hills to plant as part of a reforestation program. According to a July 14 Diqing Ribao newspaper article, the Prefecture's forest cover has risen from 65.4% a decade ago to 73.9% today. Four hundred million RMB (USD 60 million) have been invested in reforestation in Diqing over the past decade. Many signs along the roads refer to a program to restore farmlands and pastureland to trees or grass.

Assimilation and Mao on the Family Altar

¶6. (C) Diqing Prefecture remained largely quiet when widespread protests broke out during March in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Tibetan areas in the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and

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Sichuan. Although some of their elders took part in fighting against government authorities after the establishment of the PRC, Tibetans in northwestern Yunnan are today generally more assimilated to the predominant Han culture than are Tibetans in most other traditionally Tibetan areas (ref A). One indicator of Tibetan assimilation in Diqing: the proportion of people literate in Tibetan is much lower than in the TAR and in Qinghai Province. Shangri-la County has a milder climate than most other Tibetan areas that, as one Tibetan from Deqin told ConGenOff, "made us much more subject to the onslaught of the Chinese." This and the presence of more ethnic Han and other minorities in Diqing than in other traditional Tibetan areas likely helps explain why the Prefecture has been relatively quiet this year, particularly in comparison with western Sichuan's Ganzi Prefecture.

¶7. (C) At a rest stop in Deqin County on the road from Zhongdian, ConGenOff visited the kitchen of a local Tibetan family. Hung in the place of honor above the family stove was a poster of China's leaders past and present. Later, invited into a home in Deqin city by a junior high school student who has a Tibetan mother and a father of a different minority, ConGenOff saw a bust of Mao Zedong included on a family altar that combined Tibetan and Chinese religious themes. Mentioning this in a Tibetan home during a subsequent visit to Lhasa, ConGenOff's host exclaimed, "Nobody here would do such a thing!"

Visit with the Founder of a Local Tibetan NGO

¶8. (C) ConGenOff visited Kawagebo, a ten-year-old local NGO that promotes Tibetan language and culture in Deqin County and met with its founder, Sonam Norbu (strictly protect), an ethnic Tibetan who works at the Deqin County Cultural Bureau. Several international NGOs have provided support to Kawagebo. The first evening of ConGenOff's visit, Sonam Norbu invited him to a bar where many of his acquaintances, including a journalist from the

prefecture party newspaper Diqing Ribao and an ethnic Han Buddhist fluent in Tibetan who works for the Deqin County Environmental Bureau, had gathered. After the journalist and most of the others had left, Sonam Norbu, already drunk, bemoaned the assimilation of Tibetans into the majority Han culture. He asserted many Tibetans in Deqin no longer care about their own culture. He also complained that his work as a cultural bureau official, running the county library and cataloguing county cultural relics, has not really accomplished anything. Like most work in the local government, it is just a matter of "going through the motions" (xingshizhuyi). He said it is very hard to make progress in strengthening Tibetan culture, adding, "you know the kind of regime this is." Sonam Norbu stressed he hopes to make real achievements in promoting Tibetan culture through his NGO.

¶ 9. (C) Sonam Norbu promised the next evening to further discuss frankly the difficulties he faces. The next evening, before the meeting, ConGenOff was invited by two Buddhist monks to visit the office of the NGO. The environmental bureau official of the previous night was already there and spoke with the monks in fluent Tibetan. She told ConGenOff that she had studied Tibetan in Qinghai after getting an engineering degree in Kunming. Sonam Norbu and some of his friends later arrived but would not engage with ConGenOff in a serious discussion. From what the ethnic Han environmental official later said to ConGenOff, it was clear that Sonam Norbu's friends had advised him that there was "no benefit" to being overly frank.

Visit to the Deqin County Library

¶ 10. (C) A visit to the Deqin County Library fleshed out Sonam Norbu's complaint about official cultural work being a matter of just going through the motions. The library is located in a two-story building that includes meeting rooms and a reading room gets little traffic. During the two mornings that ConGenOff visited, drying mushrooms were spread over the card catalogue. A check of the card catalogue suggested that all the books were at least ten years old. The only current magazines in the reading room were Communist Party periodicals such as Seeking Truth (Qiushi) and compilations of central and Yunnan government notices.

Security Relatively Light

¶ 11. (C) On the six-hour bus ride from Zhongdian to Deqin, ConGenOff ran into only one checkpoint located at the Deqin County line at which his passport, along with the ID cards of the local people he was riding with, were checked. Many buses and trucks take the two-lane highway that climbs as high as 4200

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meters through the plateau country of Tibetan herders. A gas station in Deqin city posted a sign that only one car or person may enter the gas station at a time. ConGenOff observed a car waiting outside a gas station with four pumps until the car already in the station left.

Unrest Hurt Diqing Trade with TAR

¶ 12. (C) A Deqin city based long distance truck driver who used to make the five-day 1400 kilometer trip from Deqin to Lhasa five times a year told ConGenOff that trucking trips to the TAR had dropped considerably since March. Daily bus service runs from Deqin to Lhasa, Chamdo and other cities in the TAR. According to Diqing TAP official statistics, both domestic and foreign tourism in Diqing fell by a third during the first three months of 2008 compared with the same months in 2007.

Fighting Crime and Corruption

¶ 13. (SBU) Bulletin boards and signs that ConGenOff saw around

Deqin city indicated some of the local concerns:

--Lists of minimum income public assistance recipients were posted in downtown Deqin with the names, ID numbers, and notes on their circumstances in an apparent effort to reduce corruption. Similarly, the Diqing Ribao published the license plate numbers of all the taxis and trucks in the prefecture that get fuel subsidies.

-- Many posters warning against counterfeiting Chinese currency and the identification points of Chinese paper money and coins. In late June, the Diqing Ribao carried a story about party and government cadres visiting a village to explain in Tibetan how to identify Chinese currency. The front-page story mentioned that the fight against counterfeiting is important for maintaining social stability in Diqing Prefecture.

-- Drug seizures were up during the first half of 2008 in Diqing. Ice and methamphetamines are a growing concern.

-- A large poster in downtown Deqin condemned sale of fake tobacco products. According to the Diqing Ribao, production of tobacco products in Deqin County has grown rapidly over the past five years with tax income from the tobacco industry in Deqin County rose from 2 million RMB in 2002 to 20 million in 2007.

What's in the Paper?

¶14. (SBU) The Diqing Ribao, the daily newspaper of the Prefecture Communist Party, indicated on July 31 that a local bank gave 900 MP3 players to public security, PAP and PLA officers and soldiers stationed in Deqin city, thereby giving perhaps a hint of the size of the police and military presence there. Qu Yunfu, political commissar of the Chinese Communist Party's Diqing Prefecture military sub-district, in a speech published in Diqing Ribao on July 30, wrote that "unity of the various nationalities of the prefecture, stability and economic development are the pressing tasks for the Diqing military sub-district, especially given the strategic position of Diqing at the border of Yunnan, Sichuan and the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the history of three armed revolts in Diqing. Diqing has been fighting Tibetan independence for a long time. Ideological work must take a high priority and we face a complex difficult struggle in that area, especially with the infiltration and disruptions created by the Dalai gang and western anti-China forces."

Comments

¶15. (C) Why has Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture been relatively quiet this year? Likely explanations include:

-- Diqing is the most assimilated to mainstream Han culture of all the major Tibetan areas in China;

-- Diqing has a greater proportion of Han and other ethnic minorities (65 percent) than most other major Tibetan areas;

-- Diqing is the only major Tibetan ethnic Tibetan area to have an ethnic Tibetan Party Secretary. (Note: Ref B discusses Party Secretary Qi Zhala's influence).

-- To judge by the absence from the Diqing Ribao of hard-line articles on patriotic education compared with counterpart party papers in other Tibetan areas, Diqing authorities may not be implementing the kind of intense "patriotic education campaign" that has stirred up such intense resentment in Tibetan ethnic areas in Sichuan since early 2007. A July edition of the Diqing Ribao, however, did discuss three-day indoctrination sessions required of any monks returning from monasteries in the TAR.

¶16. (C) The Diqing Ribao stands out from most Chinese communist

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newspapers these days (but not from Party papers in other Tibetan areas.) for the exceptional turgidity of the prose and mix of stress of current and throwback catch phrases from three or four years ago. Article after article discuss "liberating thinking" (jiefang sixiang) which seems to come down to promoting correct thinking and the Party line. This rigid thinking in the press seems to mirror the rigidity in the Party

and government administration in the Tibetan areas notwithstanding the call of the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress to "liberate thinking." While the Dalai Lama is criticized occasionally, the long, strongly worded attacks on the Dalai Lama typical of the media in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and in Tibetan areas of Sichuan. Lengthy discussions of patriotic education campaigns are remarkably absent. Dqing Ribao is online at www.shangri-lanews.com ; Dqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture government website: www.dqing.gov.cn

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